

# Cavafy's Sensual City: A Question

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In his perceptive book, *Cavafy's Alexandria* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976), Edmund Keeley describes how Cavafy's major poetic preoccupation during the years 1911 to 1921 was the delineation of a mythical city called Alexandria and of the Greek, or Hellenic, way of life it represents. An essential element in this way of life is its erotic style, which is explicitly homosexual; and it is through his poems on erotic themes that Cavafy slowly and deliberately builds his image of Alexandria as the Sensual City. His method of doing this is particular. In depicting other features of his mythical city Cavafy locates his poems in that ancient Hellenistic world of which Alexandria was the centre. Most of his erotic poetry, on the other hand, speaks of episodes and relationships in contemporary Alexandria, the city in which Cavafy actually lived. Indeed, all the poetry which Cavafy wrote that is located in contemporary Alexandria deals with erotic themes to the exclusion of all others. And it is with the help of this poetry that Cavafy builds up his image.

Yet this is not all. For although Cavafy began writing this personal erotic poetry, set in contemporary Alexandria, in 1904, he did not begin publishing it until 1912—until, that is to say, he had made what appears to be this conscious decision to create his 'myth' of Alexandria. Even then he did not publish it in a single collection. On the contrary, in the years that followed 1912 he began to insert one or two of these contemporary erotic poems among those set in ancient Alexandria which composed each of his annual groupings distributed during these years to his select company of readers. He did this apparently so that his readers would have before them a more-or-less continuous

image of the erotic life—the specifically homosexual erotic life—of contemporary Alexandria alongside the historical and mythical world of ancient Alexandria which his other poems served to create. And it is to be noted that these other poems also include erotic poems, notably the five Alexandrian ‘epitaphs’ published between 1914 and 1918, each commemorating a young man both directly identified with ancient Alexandria and notorious as an object of that homosexual love which Cavafy is concerned to present as the Alexandrian kind of love *par excellence*.

What is Cavafy’s purpose in adopting this somewhat elaborate procedure? Keeley himself discerns two inter-related motives. First, it serves Cavafy’s version of the mythical method—the manipulation of a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity through what James Joyce called two-plane writing. But the major thematic purpose, Keeley writes, ‘was to underline areas of continuity, even of identity, between past and present in the erotic experience of the lovers portrayed, while at the same time underlining the vast differences between past and present in the station and social value of these lovers. Put in its simplest terms, the lovers of Cavafy’s ancient Alexandria are not only accepted by their society, but are often depicted as representing the best which that society has to offer . . . whereas Cavafy’s contemporary lovers are generally depicted as impoverished outcasts.’

This is true so far as it goes. But I wonder whether it is not possible to push it a little further—whether, indeed, it must not be pushed a little further if one is to grasp its significance more fully. If Cavafy was as self-conscious and deliberate in this procedure as Keeley maintains (and there is no reason to doubt it), then it may well be that Cavafy had a motive, conscious or unconscious, that went beyond both the underlining of areas of continuity between past and present and the contrasting of the status of the homosexual lover in the ancient and modern city. Indeed, it may well be that this underlining and contrasting were themselves intended to serve this further purpose. One must remember that Cavafy’s mythical city—his ancient Alexandria with the Greek way of life it represents—is in a sense his ideal city. It embodies and expresses the values of the best type of human society and behaviour. It provides a norm and a

standard according to which other societies, other patterns of human behaviour, may be assessed and judged. And this applies also to the type of love to which the city is dedicated. That too for Cavafy is the ideal type of love. It is the highest that society and indeed human life itself have to offer. It is not the exception, still less is it a corruption. On the contrary, it is the standard, the norm. When man is that 'best of all things, Hellenic', his eroticism is homosexual.

What I am suggesting, then, is that Cavafy's device of inserting his poems on contemporary erotic themes into those annual groupings devoted to the creation of his 'myth' of ancient Alexandria not only underlines the status to which the noblest, the most normal form of eroticism has been reduced in the modern world. It also highlights the moral shoddiness and degradation of a society which, like that of contemporary Alexandria, does not value and acclaim homosexual eroticism in the way in which, according to Cavafy's 'myth', it was valued and acclaimed in the ideal society of ancient Alexandria. The effect therefore of Cavafy's device is not only to suggest that homosexual eroticism is entirely normal—is indeed as superior to heterosexual eroticism as ancient Alexandrian society is to contemporary Alexandrian society; it is also to judge this modern society in that it fails to recognize this because it is bigoted and has 'all its values wrong'. In other words, Cavafy's purpose is moral and didactic in the fullest and strictest sense.

Yet it is precisely at this point that a question arises. Of the rare utterances that Cavafy made about himself, perhaps the most emphatic is his claim that he might have been an historian: 'A hundred and twenty-five voices within me cry that I might have been an historian.' True or not, his poetry and his poetic method support his claim. Perhaps there has never been a poet who has dedicated himself so devotedly to recreating in his poetry a past historical epoch and its character. And he does it with such minute attention to detail. All his historical poems—the incidents and circumstances to which his poetry refers—are carefully researched. They all—or nearly all—have their sources. They can in a sense be verified. Indeed, one might say that this effect of historical verisimilitude is essential to Cavafy's method and to the purpose it is intended to fulfil. His mythical city, his ancient Alexandria and its way of life, are, he

must convince us, not fantasy, not mere fiction or a dream-world, but correspond to an historical actuality. If they are to function as an objective correlative, and so to provide moral and didactic criteria according to which contemporary society can be judged, they must themselves be presented as objective and as embodying these criteria. Had they not embodied them—or were the reader not persuaded that they embodied them—then these criteria would be inoperative and Cavafy's purpose would be defeated. And the point is that Cavafy succeeds in convincing the reader that they *were* embodied in the ancient Alexandrian world and its way of life, and so *do* possess a pragmatic validity, because of the enormous precautions he takes to appear as an authentic historian. It is in this way that he convinces the reader of the historical verisimilitude of his ancient Alexandria. And if the reader should doubt it, then he can check the facts for himself—or at least consult the copious historical notes which Cavafy's conscientious editors have provided.

So it is that the reader of Cavafy's poetry, convinced of the historical basis, even historical authenticity, of this portrait of Alexandria and its way of life, is persuaded too that its erotic proclivities and values, as Cavafy conveys them, are equally based in historical actuality, are equally authentic. They too are part and parcel of an historical way of life, of an historical society. Homosexuality in this society really was the norm. It really was acknowledged as the best form of love that that society could offer. It was the ideal—an ideal actually lived out in practice. If other aspects of this Alexandrian world possess historical verisimilitude, why not this aspect also? And because it does possess it—because the reader is *persuaded* that it does possess it—and so is an actual lived value, it too can provide an effective criterion according to which a society that debases its status, and offers as the norm other forms of love, can be judged and morally condemned.

But—and this is the question—did this particular form of eroticism in fact possess that status in the ancient Alexandrian world which it must be accorded if Cavafy's moral and didactic purpose is to be effective? I personally do not know the answer. But I suspect that it did not. I suspect that Cavafy, in adopting his particular procedure for publishing his erotic poems, was attempting a deliberate sleight of hand. He was attempting to

create an impression which he knew to be, historically speaking, a false one but which he had to create in order to establish the pragmatic validity of the erotic criterion he wished to promote. I am not suggesting of course that homosexuality was vilified and outlawed in the ancient Alexandria as it was in Cavafy's contemporary Alexandria. But did it have that status which it appears to have in Cavafy's 'myth'? Was it not much more a kind of convention—a convention with no greater distinction, or opprobrium, attached to it than in later societies was attached to the convention of keeping a dancing girl before one married and settled down? As Proust puts it, the shepherd in Theocritus who sighs for love of a boy is in no way more singular than the other shepherd whose flute sounds for Amaryllis: both are simply conforming to the customs of the time. Certainly, a Hellenistic novel like that of the Alexandrian, Achilles Tatius, presents us with a range of heterosexual erotic possibilities, fully exploited by the young men of that world, not one of which gets so much as a mention in Cavafy's canon. And are there authentic prototypes for those five Alexandrian 'epitaphs' to which Cavafy was at such pains to give the appearance of historical authenticity, and which are so crucial to the creation of the image of his Sensual City? And does this image itself, together with the erotic poems (whether set in ancient or contemporary Alexandria) which go into its building, represent anything more than a dream-world, poignant but pathetic, whose increasingly lonely denizen, compelled all his life to conceal his tendencies from others and even perhaps at times to disguise them to himself, can find redress only in a stance of moral superiority (courageous, genuine and entirely justified) which at least allows him to condemn the society that has crippled him so cruelly?

*Limni,  
Evia,  
Greece*